

Beyond the Vulnerable Self: The ‘Resisting Reader’ of Marriage Manuals for Heterosexual Women¹

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In *Therapy Culture* Frank Furedi argues that the current dominant perception of the self is of a vulnerable entity requiring repeated sessions of psychological mediation in order to function (Furedi 21). This paper explains that two contemporary relationship manuals directed to heterosexual women propose models of the wifely self that conform to Furedi’s characterisation. It is also argued, however, that *Therapy Culture* overstates the acceptance of this construction of the self. Judith Fetterley’s concept of the “resisting reader” is employed to highlight stout opposition among reader responses to the manuals’ representations of the ‘vulnerable’ feminine self.

The thesis of *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in An Uncertain Age*, sociologist Frank Furedi’s influential examination of the proliferation of therapeutic discourse, is that the dominant contemporary portrayal of, and attitude towards, the self is of a “fragile and feeble” entity requiring ongoing assistance from psychological experts in order to function (Furedi 21). It is alleged that the notion of the vulnerable self is so widespread that it “influences the behaviour of a significant section of society, at least some of the time” (203). This paper questions Furedi’s contention about the pervasiveness of the notion of the vulnerable self by analysing reader responses to two marriage manuals for heterosexual women. Specifically, Internet reader reviews provide evidence of what Judith Fetterley has called the “resisting reader”: it is maintained that although the vulnerable self is the preferred reading position of both texts, resistant readings confirm the robust existence of alternative conceptions of the self.

According to *Therapy Culture*, conceiving the self as vulnerable promotes a “new conservatism” because a “diminished” perception of one’s capacity to change society disinclines people towards political activism (203, 132). In other words, a passive notion of self suppresses the social agency of citizens because “the experimenting and transformative role of the individual is all but extinguished” (204). The portrayal of social problems as individual, psychological problems is said to be key to promoting a vulnerable self: Furedi states that “emotional determinism” has replaced the economic determinism of previous eras, with actions now attributed to feelings rather than economics (25). For instance, crimes are ascribed to psychological factors instead of more traditional impetuses like poverty/economic gain and the consequences of racism are described in terms of psychological impact rather than societal inequities (30, 26). Similarly, an emotionally deterministic perspective casts intimate relationships as a source of danger because the emotional investment that they involve “threatens to

¹ This paper was presented to the Second Annual Rhizomes: Re-Visioning Boundaries Conference of The School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies, The University of Queensland, in Brisbane, 24-25 February 2006. Thanks to Nancy E. Wright for comments on an earlier version of the paper.

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subordinate the self to another” (32). *Therapy Culture* maintains that it is in governments’ interests to foster the notion of the vulnerable self because individuals who feel powerless are easier to control: “Therapy, like the wider culture of which it is a part, teaches people to know their place” (204).³

Therapy Culture, as Robert Van Krieken suggests, devotes inadequate attention to what Van Krieken aptly describes as “counter-tendencies and parallel developments” to the concept of the vulnerable self (Van Krieken 57).⁴ It is a shortcoming that is shared by the critical literature on relationship manuals for heterosexual women, which expresses paternalistic concern about the negative impact of the texts on women, since the manuals are said to exclude references to socio-cultural factors and solutions. For instance, Wendy Simonds claims that the self-help genre “fails” women because the personal, psychological changes that the texts propose do not suggest the collective action that Simonds regards as necessary for social change; consequently, Simonds deems self-help books’ “therapeutic and individualistic solutions” as “only an illusory cure for what ails us, collectively, as a culture” (Simonds 227). From a viewpoint more in keeping with Furedi’s concern about the politically passive citizens produced by the discourse of the vulnerable self, Rebecca Hazleden’s Foucauldian reading of relationship manuals asserts that the texts promote the production of emotionally detached citizens who are easily governed: “A society in which such relationships were the norm would be one composed of ‘effective’ citizens who were able to take care of themselves and understand their ultimate responsibility for their own behaviour, for their own happiness or unhappiness, while detaching themselves from the happiness or unhappiness of others” (Hazleden 425). Likewise, although Debra Grodin’s readership study emphasises readers’ active engagement with texts (“readers use them selectively and strategically to think about and negotiate self” Grodin “Interpreting” 133), it also states that the manuals do not promote change beyond an individual level: “Rarely are patriarchal conditions of life mentioned in the books or discussed by readers” (Grodin “Women” 132).

A refreshingly dissonant voice in the academic reception is Vycki Anastasiadis Atallah’s *By the Book: Women and Self-Help Book Reading*. Atallah’s 2004 readership study asserts that the ten women interviewed used discrimination in their choice and interpretation of texts. For example, the majority of women “rejected books that sought to blame women” (66). More controversially, *By the Book* maintains that reading self-

³ In Australia, a recent instance of attempted government control of citizens’ private lives is the Federal Government’s announcement that sixty-five “family relationship centres” will open over the next three years, allegedly to prevent relationship breakdown (Hudson 10). The politician promoting the project, Phillip Ruddock, expresses a classic view of the vulnerable self, regarding constant professional psychological intervention as a certainty, referring to the “regular maintenance” of intimate relationships that families should undertake with the assistance of the relationship centres (Hudson 10).

⁴ *Therapy Culture* acknowledges alternatives to the vulnerable self to some extent, pointing out that although the vulnerable self has gained ascendancy, oppositional models of the self remain in circulation (Furedi 22). Yet, Furedi maintains that although people “also read from other scripts,” they use psychological ways of thinking, particularly the pre-eminent notion of the vulnerable self, to understand their identity (23). In addition, Furedi charts how other discourses have been subsumed by the therapeutic, as in the case of religion: “Gradually, the theologian has assumed the role of the therapist” (Furedi 17).

help books enhanced political awareness in some readers: self-help reading “propelled some of the women [...] into pursuing other (more political) feminist activities” (69). The participants in Atallah’s study were not assigned texts and thus do not necessarily refer to the same texts in speaking of their own, general experience of self-help reading; *The Surrendered Wife* and *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* are not discussed. In contrast, in the current paper it is essential that reader responses are to the same texts so that reading positions can be compared with the dominant reading position. A feminist reader-response methodology is employed to bring into prominence oppositional readings and conceptions of the self – Van Krieken’s ‘counter tendencies’.⁵ Thus, whereas Atallah, as a psychologist, focuses on the general appeal of self-help manuals to women, this paper’s literary/cultural interest is on the reading and subject positions that enable readers to challenge the dominant textual positioning of two contemporary marriage manuals.

A transactional reader-response theory holds that because reading involves the interplay between reader and text, reader diversity in terms of historical and social context leads to a diversity of interpretation (Rosenblatt 89). Significantly, reader agency is celebrated in this theoretical approach, for although texts may express what is called a dominant or “preferred reading position,” readers do not always adopt this position: “what stands between a text’s potential or preferred effect and an actualized effect is a reader who has a history of his/her own” (Smith 34). In other words, readers’ assumption of various subject positions, such as class and feminist perspectives, enable resistance of the dominant subject positioning of a text. As Janice Radway, author of the famous romance readership study, came to recognise, it is possible that reading romance novels could awaken one’s feminist consciousness since “Reading is never a simple linear con job” (Radway, quoting Alison Light, Radway 220).

Of especial use to an analysis of contemporary marriage manuals is Judith Fetterley’s notion of the “resisting reader.” As defined by Fetterley, the “resisting reader” is a specifically feminist reader who refuses to assume a reading position that forces her to read against her female subjectivity. To elaborate, in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, Fetterley argues that women are educated to identify with a male perspective and values: “As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” (xx). Fetterley asserts that identification with a male point of view requires the splitting of a woman’s experience of self, since male selfhood is defined in binary terms – in opposition to what is not male (*Resisting* xiii). For example, although Sherwood Anderson’s short story “I Want to Know Why” is critical of the accepted model of manhood, the focus remains on the experience of men: “we cry for the boy [who must become a man] and not for the whores he will eventually make use of” (*Resisting* xiv).

⁵ A non-feminist reader-response interpretation follows the reception trend by arguing that self-help books function conservatively because they allegedly employ narrative conventions that “disallow any of the moves necessary for a real reader to arrive at an interpretation on her own” (Richardson 256). In contrast, Fetterley’s concept of the ‘resisting reader’ allows the possibility of reader agency.

By these means, the female reader is denied the “sense of power derived from the experience of perceiving oneself as central, as subject, as literally because literarily the point of view from which the rest of the world is seen” (“Reading” 150).

In Fetterley’s analyses, the significance of the masculine default reading position cannot be overstated since “the struggle for control of textuality is nothing less than the struggle for control over the definition of sanity and madness” (Fetterley *Resisting* 160). In a patriarchal society, the power to define belongs to men. With reference to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Fetterley demonstrates that the unacceptable female self is “Sprawling, flamboyant, sinful, irritating, provoking, outrageous, unheard of” (“Reading” 162). Given the political stakes of the representation of women, Fetterley maintains that the initial action of the “feminist critic must to be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader” (*Resisting* xxii). Writing in the 1970s, Fetterley asserted that all ‘classic’ American literature should be approached in this way since “To read the canon of what is currently considered American literature is perforce to identify as male” (*Resisting* xii). However, for the contemporary context, I suggest that all texts be approached critically, since an androcentric or patriarchal viewpoint is not exclusive to the literary works of male canonical authors.

Both Laura Doyle’s *The Surrendered Wife* and Laura Schlessinger’s *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* present the patriarchal perspective on what constitutes a good wife. The manuals define the model of desirable wifely behaviour through contrast: the figure of the ‘shrew’ is invoked to embody the anti-wife or antithesis of the feminine ideal. The shrew is an enduring model of aberrant femininity/wifedom; as Fetterley observes: “Though one of the most persistent of literary stereotypes is the castrating bitch, the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women [...]” (*Resisting* xx).⁶

Doyle describes herself as “a feminist and former shrew” in her author biography (Doyle 286). She charts her own and other women’s successful change from a controlling harpy, whose behaviour leaves her feeling “overwhelmed, lonely and responsible for everything” and her husband “emasculated,” to a serene woman who experiences success in all aspects of her life, especially her marriage (25, 22, 15). Doyle includes a quiz at the beginning of the book to facilitate the reader in assessing how “nagging, critical, or controlling” they are as a wife (14-15). Essentially, transformation is achieved by abandoning “controlling” behaviours and acting in accordance with traditional notions of femininity: by these means the “horror of your old self” is replaced with one’s “best self: the one who is good natured and easy to please. The one who laughs easily and listens well [...]” (226, 68). Schlessinger likewise fills *The Proper Care and Feeding* with numerous examples of repenting and reformed women; the examples provided are more ‘professional’ than autobiographical and are drawn from Schlessinger’s radio advice program and her private practice. According to Schlessinger, respecting one’s husband by treating him well, including attending to his sexual needs, will result in a happier marriage; on the other hand, engaging in

⁶ Ruth Wajnryb notes that Chaucer’s *Prologue* uses shrew to mean bitch (8).

“emasculating” behaviour like rejecting a husband’s sexual advances will have the opposite effect (74). To reiterate, the preferred reading position of both manuals is that women must discard their shrewish attitude and behaviour in favour of a more ‘feminine’ mode of being if they desire a happy marriage. As in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, a bad tempered woman must be chastened, tamed, de-clawed in order to achieve marital happiness, for as Doyle boasts, the “anger, loneliness, depletion and resentment” of the shrew is replaced with “peace, joy, and feeling good about yourself and your marriage” (64, 19).

The preferred reading position corresponds with Furedi’s description of the vulnerable self in a number of ways. Most notable is the alleged societal “internal turn” or focus on the psychological life of the self, lamented in both *Therapy Culture* and the literature on relationship manuals because the attribution of actions and choices to emotional causes rather than social/economic factors is perceived as inhibiting political action (Furedi 24-25). Thus, *The Surrendered Wife* argues that changing one’s own behaviour is the only productive action available to a wife because “You can’t make him change – you can only change yourself” and “you can’t fix the phone company or the principal, but you can heal yourself” (25, 171); however, at the same time Doyle claims that “He will change as soon as you begin practicing the principles of *The Surrendered Wife*” (32). Similarly, *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* states that women “are wrong if they think a new pair of pants [or husband] will change their lives – because the same skirt will be in the room!” (5). To this end, Schlessinger advises wives to “tune out of herself and tune into him” or regard her needs as secondary to her husband’s, which involves such measures as complimenting him about something for five successive days and accepting all his sexual advances (123, xii).

As the negative academic reception of relationship manuals indicates, the portrayal of wifely self-change as potential marriage saviour has a flipside, with shrewish behaviour held accountable for husbands’ undesirable behaviour. For instance, Doyle states that adultery is likely “his inappropriate reaction to years of emasculation and criticism from his wife” (29). That is, men are allegedly motivated to cheat by the erosion of their self-esteem/masculinity through shrewish wifely behaviour (215).⁷ There is no mention, for example, of the societal sexual double standard that sanctions male sexual freedom. Likewise, Schlessinger asserts that “most of the oppression women experience is of their own making – through their misguided choices and attitudes” (135-36). Schlessinger also claims that a man’s inability to “find peace in his own home, where he should be able to feel relaxed, accepted, loved, and content” is “often the precipitator of stupid behaviours like drinking or taking drugs, Internet shenanigans, and inappropriate flirting or worse” (38). There is no reference to the history of women’s oppression or to the wider socio-economic context that influences such behaviour, with the exception of

⁷ Furedi maintains that sex is now seen as potentially emotionally damaging (*Therapy* 79). For example, Schlessinger alleges that: “To be turned down [sexually] is extremely hurtful, and is very harmful to the relationship [...]” (131). Revealingly, Schlessinger’s comment about women causing their own oppression is made in the chapter on sex (135-36).

blaming feminism for women's resentful attitudes towards taking care of a house and a husband.⁸

Another example of the confluence of the dominant reading position with the notion of the vulnerable self is the portrayal of the shrewish feminine self as requiring ongoing assistance to address their "emotional deficit" (Furedi 5). Doyle emphasises the need for continued support in making the change from shrewish to 'surrendered' behaviour by recommending Surrendered Circles, a support group of women who are all attempting the transition, including Internet Surrendered Circles (26). Schlessinger focuses on the difficulty of working against what she sees as the dominant model of femininity and strongly recommends avoiding sources, such as feminist psychotherapy, that advocate 'shrewish' behaviour (3, 13, 99). Finally, the manuals' depiction of intimate relationships as potential sources of emotional hurt fits with Furedi's characterisation of the vulnerable self (Furedi 32). Specifically, both Doyle and Schlessinger instruct readers in assessing whether their husband belongs to the alleged majority of men who are "good guys" (Doyle 27) as opposed to the minority who have a "frank mental or personality disorder (the exception, not the rule)" (Schlessinger xvii). Even if husbands pass this initial risk assessment, they are still portrayed as a possible source of emotional pain, as indicated in the comment that "Wives need to love their husbands as though they've never been hurt before" (Schlessinger 51). Doyle also acknowledges that making oneself 'vulnerable' or emotionally open is difficult: "Saying 'ouch' [to indicate that one's husband's comment is hurtful] is as good as telling your husband he made a direct hit to your jugular" (179).

The orthodox interpretation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, represented by the *Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, requires that "Modern audiences must accept an Elizabethan argument that Katharina is not the loser by her taming" (Ousby 972). Similarly, *The Surrendered Wife* and *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* attempt to convince the reader that shrewish behaviour must be abandoned for both the wife and her husband's happiness. However, the resistant reader does not have to accept the preferred readings of either the canonical text or the marriage manuals. That is, readers can resist the subject positioning of a text by adopting a reading and subject position that differs from the dominant perspective.⁹ As evidence of potential reader resistance, I have

⁸ Intriguingly, unlike Shakespeare's play where wifely submission is the norm and shrewish behaviour an aberration, *The Surrendered Wife* and *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* portray the shrew as the contemporary norm of female subjectivity. For instance, Schlessinger claims that the second wave feminist movement has created selfish women who put themselves before husband and family: "These calls are *not* aberrant. They reflect truly typical attitudes of a preponderance of women in today's America" (xxi). Similarly, Schlessinger argues that "much of the psychotherapeutic profession" is influenced by the 'feminist' notion that "men are the bad guys, and women are oppressed" and for this reason their solutions of "feminize the husband or suggest divorce" do not improve many marriages (99). On the other hand, Doyle favours a neo-Freudian explanation for the preponderance of shrewish behaviour by focusing on childhood experiences as creating the belief that "if we were always in charge, things were more likely to go our way" (21).

⁹ Amy L. Smith's performance studies reading of *The Taming of the Shrew* makes a similar argument to the current paper in that it also views conformity as never perfectly achieved because behaviour is performed

surveyed Internet book reviews by general or non-specialist readers. The reviews were selected because they are a readily accessible source of non-academic interpretations (“a bottomless repository of honest aesthetic responses”) and a source that has been largely untapped (Salusinszky R44). Since reader reviews are offered voluntarily and with no monetary payment attached, they are likely to consist of the unaffected aesthetic responses prized by reader-response theorists. Specifically, my analysis of reader responses is based on one-hundred and fifty-six reader reviews of *The Surrendered Wife* and fifty-six reader reviews of *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands*.¹⁰ The reviews are “customer reviews” obtained from Amazon.com on 27 September 2005. They comprise a considerable data base of reader responses when compared to existing readership studies, which are based on much smaller samples: Atallah’s analysis, for example, is based on interviews with ten women. Amazon.com is an American site, and most reviews appear to come from American readers, since American cities and states are the most frequently given locations. However, this cannot be stated with certainty since reviews are often anonymous and even readers who provide a name or Internet name do not always give a location. Readers worldwide can post reviews, as did *Surrendered Wife* reviewers in Ireland (SW review 15), Australia (SW review 17), Kuwait (SW review 25), and Nigeria (SW review 56). The display order selected was reverse chronological order.

Language columnist Ruth Wajnryb observes that like words such as “tramp” and “siren,” the feminisation of “shrew” has occurred concurrently with its stigmatisation: shrew now only applies to females and is, as Wajnryb notes, a particularly harsh word, “a blatant dysphemism, an in-your-face kind of word that calls a spade a shovel” (8). My analysis focuses on reviews which show readers resisting the manuals’ dominant characterisation of wives as shrewish and, relatedly, the notion of the vulnerable self. In other words, by opposing the subject positioning of the manuals, readers are asserting their agency and thus rejecting the conceptualisation of the self as powerless. However, it is important to contextualise resistant readings by commenting upon the distribution of responses. Of the one-hundred and fifty-six reviews of *The Surrendered Wife*, fifty-six adopt oppositional or resistant readings and seventy-seven are positive endorsements; mixed responses, or reviews which recommended the manual with concessions, account for the remaining twenty-two responses. Similarly, some fourteen of fifty-six reviews of *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* can be considered resistant readings while there are thirty-nine positive recommendations and three mixed responses. In other words, thirty-nine-point-one percent and twenty-five percent of the reader reviews, respectively, construct resistant readings of *The Surrendered Wife* and *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands*. Additionally, mixed responses, in which a reader recommends a manual but expresses misgivings about certain aspects of the text, account for twenty-three percent and five-point-four percent, respectively, of responses. These figures reveal that resistant readings comprise a substantial minority of responses. The word limit of this paper

by we pesky humans with a taste for resistance: “Early modern marriage, like all institutions, exists only in the imperfect and often resistance repetitions of its subjects” (np).

¹⁰ Although there are one-hundred and fifty-nine reviews of *The Surrendered Wife*, three were disregarded because they were doubles: 59 is identical to 60, 152 is identical to 153, and 101 is identical to 102, except the latter has two extra sentences. Similarly, a double in reviews of *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* was disregarded: 35 is a duplicate of 32.

circumscribes my discussion to negative or resistant reviews: readings that do not recommend the manuals.

The resistant readings of *The Surrendered Wife* and *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands* take various forms. Most pertinent to Fetterley's depiction of the consciously questioning reader are responses that directly challenge the veracity of a text's version of events. For example, 'Karen D,' a reader of *The Surrendered Wife*, challenges the idea that the model of wifely behaviour set out in *The Surrendered Wife* will promote marital happiness. Karen uses the life experience of her grandmother to argue that such submissive behaviour results in a wife being badly treated by her husband. Karen describes how her grandmother has not been away on a holiday for thirty years because it is her grandfather's decision (and he decides not to travel). As well Karen criticises the lack of respect shown by her grandfather towards her grandmother and women in general: "He belittles her in public. He never asks what she wants or what she thinks. He did not become a prince to compliment his princess. When she started acting like a slave he started treating her like one" (SW review 36). This description is in direct opposition to Doyle's promise of the rewards of 'surrendered' behaviour. The first stated reward is that a wife's change in behaviour will promote a husband's positive change: "no matter how quickly we take action and no matter how dramatic our growth, our husbands always seem to keep pace with us" (264). The second, related reward is said to be a happier marriage for both partners: "Today, I have the intimate marriage I always dreamed was possible. If you surrender to your husband, you will too"(273). In Doyle's account, a surrendered wife becomes a VIP instead of a chauffeur (57); in Karen's reading, surrendering does not even get her grandmother a seat in the car. The comments of a reader of *The Proper Care and Feeding*, who also employs life experience in constructing an oppositional reading, concur with Karen's criticism:

I know men whose wives did all: cook favorite [sic] foods [...], did magnificent sex every night, and in the end these men were annoyed rather than happy, went to find variety or someone cooler and 'misterious.' And on top called these ex-wives 'too emotional', 'too clingy', 'not serious enough' [...]" (PC review 46).

Furthermore, a reader of the *Surrendered Wife* disputes the idea that the model of femininity is beneficial even for husbands. Following a similar model resulted in the death of the reader's brother-in-law since he told his wife that he was fine, she suspected otherwise but did not voice her opinion, and he died of a coronary before he could get to the hospital (SW review 67).

Some readers focus their criticisms on the potentially negative financial consequences for women of following the models of wifely behaviour. One reader of *The Surrendered Wife* refers readers to alternative written sources of information about the consequences of adopting the model of femininity, instructing women to "Read Doris Days [sic] book about her life and how her husband mishandled her money and left her broke" (SW review 90). Other reviewers caution potential readers about the emotional as well as the financial "dangers" involved in surrendered behaviour (SW review 70). In this context, some readers query the authors' credentials. For instance, a reader of *Proper Care*, who

asserts that the advice “demeans both men and women,” attempts to discredit the manual’s authority by noting that Schlessinger’s doctorate is not in psychology or psychiatry and that her marriage counselling licence has not been valid for many years (PC review 37). Likewise, another review of *Proper Care* supports her rejection of the text by criticising the manual’s data sources for not being scientifically proven through longitudinal, peer-reviewed studies (PC review 38).

Assuming an explicitly feminist subject position is another powerful way that readers oppose the dominant reading of the marriage manuals. A *Surrendered Wife* reader, ‘Amanda Anderson,’ questions the allegedly favourable outcomes of adopting the manual’s model of femininity by citing Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” to claim that insanity rather than marital bliss is the likely result of adopting this kind of wifely behaviour (SW review 41). As mentioned earlier, Fetterley analyses this story in an article explicating the concept of the resisting reading (Fetterley “Reading”). In a similar manner, a feminist/self-help subject position is invoked by a reader of *The Proper Care and Feeding* in challenging the manual’s stance on wifely behaviour: the manual is dismissed because it “basically tells you to forget about your self and do everything a man says” and is thus regarded as a pseudo self-help book, since it does not focus on self-work for the enhancement of the self, but is, in contrast, an “obey your master book” (PC review 16). A number of readers oppose the manuals’ representation of gendered identity. ‘Jennifer,’ a *Surrendered Wife* reader, rejects the manual’s depiction of gender as “natural”: Jennifer argues that socialisation is responsible for gendered behaviours and states that the notion of biological gendered behaviour is “dismissive of homosexual and transsexuals who don’t fit her [Schlessinger’s] supposedly natural masculine and feminine roles” (SW review 2). Furthermore, another reader points out that being controlling is not a gendered behaviour and claims that men are often more controlling than women “in no small part because the cult of ‘masculinity’ encourages men to ‘take charge,’ be ‘in control,’ ‘wear the pants in the family [...]’” (SW review 80). As is common in feminism, personal and political arguments merge, as when a reader describes how her already “controlling” husband attempts to use *The Surrendered Wife* to exert more power by quoting the manual when criticising her behaviour: “Thanks to this book, merely asking for a favor [sic] is an act of control, giving my opinion or worse yet, telling him about something I like or find merely pretty is considered control and reason for an argument. This book has validated my husband’s behavior [sic]!” (SW review 104). Likewise, a *Proper Care* reader states that the manual portrays problems experienced by women as “exist[ing] in a vacuum and personal satisfaction is [portrayed as] equivalent to selfishness” (PC review 38).

Like feminism, other socio-political perspectives enable readers to construct resistant readings. In her review of *The Surrendered Wife*, ‘Shelagh Larkin’ objects to the sanitised world depicted which she recasts as only applicable to white, middle-class people: “Reality, for those in different ethnic and economic backgrounds, strikes when family members die, husbands get laid off, children have special needs, disabilities or chronic illness [...]” (SW review 61). For example, Shelagh objects to the way that *The Surrendered Wife* describes collecting discount vouchers and eating tuna for lunch as boring, demeaning activities. Shelagh rejects this view by stating that people on limited

incomes can derive “a sense of pride, fulfillment [sic] and accomplishment to cutting coupons and finding new recipes for tuna sandwiches.” Another *Surrendered Wife* reader questions the relevance of the manual’s advice to all women by pointing out that the “examples are drawn from a narrow socioeconomic sample free of chemical dependencies, compulsive gambling, criminal tendencies, and other fundamental problems. Marriages that fit that description are likely to improve under any reasonable therapy” (SW review 123). For similar reasons, a reader recommends the works of “bell hooks for more enlightened reading on how to build relationships based on honesty, equality, and trust” (SW review 136). Such responses contest the assertion of existing readership studies that “Rarely are patriarchal conditions of life mentioned in the books or discussed by readers” (Grodin “Women” 132).

Furedi argues that most of us see ourselves as “vulnerable and powerless people who cannot be expected to cope with life’s challenges” (Furedi “Unreason” np). *Therapy Culture* also states that “People also read from other scripts but when it comes to making sense of who they are, therapeutics exercise a formidable impact on their lives” (Furedi 23). However, this paper’s brief analysis of reader resistance to the manuals’ preferred reading positions creates a view of the reader that is at odds with the alleged prevalence of the notion of the vulnerable self. Whether it be life experience, fiction, feminism, or socio-political critique, all are employed to buttress perspectives that resist the subject positioning of the marriage manuals. Some readers explicitly reject as aberrant the characterisation of women who do not conform to the preferred model of wifely behaviour of the respectful and (especially sexually) accessible woman. Every day, readers use the thoroughly modern medium of the Internet to proclaim their agency, invoking “other scripts” and challenging the notion of a contemporary “diminished” sense of self.

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